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WASHINGTON POST
17 FEBRUARY 1983

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Qaddafi Makes An Astonishing Telephone Call

Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi made an embarrassing mistake recently. He put in a secret telephone call to Egyptian Defense Minister Abu Ghazala, and suggested that Libya and Egypt go to war against Israel.

Qaddafi had misjudged his man. Ghazala's reply to the Libyan strongman's suggestion was diplomatic but succinct: Egypt, Ghazala pointed out, has a peace treaty with Israel and does not intend to break it.

If nothing else, Qaddafi's astonishing phone call shows that he is not mellowing, as has been reported. His goal is still what it has always been—to destroy Israel and unite the Arab world under his own banner.

As a young pan-Arab zealot, Qaddafi was an admirer of the charismatic Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser, who at one point tried to unite Egypt and Libya as the first step in creating one great Arab nation.

Though Qaddafi was once close to Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat—he even lived for a time in Sadat's home—the Libyan came to believe

that Sadat had betrayed Nasser's pan-Arab dream.

The Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel seemed to set Qaddafi's hatred for Sadat in concrete. For years, the two of them engaged in shrill rhetorical exchanges, and each plotted coups and assassinations against the other. The two countries even went to war over border differences for four days in 1977, and when Sadat was assassinated in October, 1981, Qaddafi indulged in a tasteless display of public exultation.

But even during the years of hostility, Qaddafi repeatedly made secret overtures to Cairo. A secret CIA report noted that, while he was sending out his assassination squads, Qaddafi still "tried privately to reach a reconciliation with Sadat, believing that the Egyptian leader eventually would see the error of his ways."

The Libyan also was trying to butter up Ghazala during that period. He evidently thought he had succeeded, as shown by his secret phone call, the details of which were disclosed to my associate Dale Van Atta by intelligence sources.

But Ghazala, a soldier's soldier, is not the man to let Qaddafi sucker him into a war with Israel—in which, of course, Egypt would bear the brunt of the fighting.

Tales of Ghazala's heroism in the 1973 war abound in Cairo. After one losing engagement with the Israelis, for example, Ghazala—though the top Egyptian field commander—sent

his troops back to safety while he stayed behind to destroy abandoned equipment. The decision meant a long, dangerous forced march back through the desert.

Ghazala has led a charmed life. He became defense minister when his predecessor was killed in a helicopter crash. Ghazala would have been in the chopper, but he was in France to bring home his wife, who had gone there for medical treatment. On Oct. 6, 1981, he was at Sadat's side when the radical Moslem assassins struck; a grenade bounced off Ghazala's head and failed to explode.

Ghazala is staunchly pro-American and speaks fluent English. He made many friends in Washington while he was military attache at the embassy here from 1976 to 1980. He also reportedly detests the Soviets, apparently dating back to the nearly four years he spent at a senior officers' war college in the Soviet Union when the Kremlin was Egypt's overbearing ally.

Ghazala professes unwavering support for President Hosni Mubarak. "We are brothers," he said recently. "I am as loyal to the president as he was to Sadat." This does not rule out the prospect that he will succeed Mubarak someday.

As for Qaddafi's phone call, Ghazala laughed recently when asked about it. Qaddafi, he said, must be crazy. That's the same opinion Sadat often voiced.